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Leading by Example?

Women *madrassa* teachers in rural north India

Patricia Jeffery (University of Edinburgh), Roger Jeffery (University of Edinburgh)

and Craig Jeffrey (University of Oxford)

And it is also written in the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, these are the words of the *pāk Qur'ān*:

“*Tālīmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam, Alāmūl Qur'ān ta'ālam*”. Its meaning is that whoever has

read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* themselves, they should certainly teach it to others. You also

obtain *savāb* [reward] from teaching. You will receive as much *nekī* [reward for

virtue] according to the number of times the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* will be recited and taught.

... We can obtain *nekī*, without any hard work, without doing anything. Whenever we

read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*, then we shall speak these *harfe-muqatta'at* [separate letters,

that is *alif-lām-mīm* at the beginning of the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf*]. When we teach, then we

ourselves shall also say them. In that way, we can obtain *nekī* many times. We shall

teach others while we read. That is why it is necessary to learn goodness and to teach

goodness. Whoever has read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* themselves should teach others to read it

too. [Aisha, Begawala *madrassa* teacher, 20 March 2002]¹

Introduction

Muslims are contemporary India's largest religious minority, comprising about 13 per cent of the total population in 2001. They are unevenly distributed geographically and in some areas—notably Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and West Bengal in the north and Kerala in the south—Muslims are a substantial minority. About a quarter of India's Muslims live in UP, where they accounted for around 18 per cent of the population in 2001 (over 30 million).

¹ Translated from Urdu by the first author. All personal names are pseudonyms.

Within UP, too, Muslims are unevenly spread: several districts in western UP have Muslim majority towns and sizeable numbers of rural Muslims. As with the population at large, regional and rural/urban differences are notable: the large metropolitan cities—such as Mumbai and Delhi—contrast markedly with Lucknow, UP’s state capital and the historical centre of urbane élite Muslim culture in South Asia, leave aside with the *qaṣba* towns of western UP and their rural hinterlands where we conducted our research. Our project in Bijnor district (some 160 km north-east of Delhi) explored parents’ educational strategies to enhance their children’s prospects.² The research was largely qualitative and based mainly on semi-structured interviews with villagers and with teachers and managers in secondary schools and in 20 *madrasas* in Bijnor town and nearby villages, as well as on ethnographic observations.

This paper focuses on the *ustānīs* [women teachers] employed by a *madrasa* in rural Bijnor district, where a central aim of the *madrasa*’s educational regime was to inculcate habits of bodily cleanliness, demure manners and refined speech appropriate to the good Muslim. As they tried to transform their pupils from illiterate and uncouth villagers [*jāhil dihātī*] into young people able to perform the social graces and courtesies [*adab*] of the

² The Economic and Social Research Council (Grant R000238495), Ford Foundation, and Royal Geographical Society funded research by all three authors in 2000-02. None of these agencies bears any responsibility for what we have written here. The first two authors have conducted research in the district since 1982. We thank our research assistants, Swaleha Begum, Shaila Rais, Chhaya Sharma and Manjula Sharma, and those in Bijnor who have helped us over the years. We also thank participants in the Muslim Women Leaders workshop, especially Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

urbane [*khvush akhlāq*], the *ustānīs* and their male colleagues alike deployed contrasts that were heavily freighted with value judgements: between the cultured poise and well-bred polish of the urban middle classes and the ill-bred and coarse vulgarity of loutish rustics devoid of civilisation. Similar imaginaries are common amongst north Indian urbanites—indeed they figured prominently in our interviews with schoolteachers. The rustic is not associated with charming rural idylls: rather it is devalued, even perceived as dangerous, and in need of eradication.

The *ustānīs*' task was also deeply gendered and they dreamt of cultivating in their rural pupils forms of femininity compatible with genteel domesticity—in other words, of replacing rustic patriarchy with urbane patriarchy. Through the *ustānīs*' own demeanour, the girls in their charge could observe embodied examples of urbane female behaviour to supplement the texts they studied in the formal curriculum. In this sense, the *ustānīs* were trying to 'lead by example'. Yet, we argue, the *ustānīs*' authority was severely delimited. The male *madrasa* staff generally had higher formal qualifications—especially in Islamic subjects—and *parda* practices further circumscribed the *ustānīs*' capacity to influence how the *madrasa* was run. And the *ustānīs*' efforts to reform the girls in their charge were continually challenged by their pupils' young age and poor rural backgrounds and by large class sizes.

The vast majority of UP's population lives in the rural areas, and issues germane to Muslim girls' education elsewhere in the state are similar to what we describe here. Nevertheless, our paper explores a specific context, and should not be read as representative of the situation throughout India or South Asia more generally. Islamic practices are socially embedded and profiles of gender differentiation are regionally specific. In some places in South Asia, boarding *madrasas* for girls have enabled women teachers to attain positions of

moderate authority.³ Equally, women sometimes play significant roles in the *Tablīghī Jamā‘at*.⁴ More informally, women also lead all-women study groups.⁵ And some women play more publicly visible roles, for instance in relation to the reform of Muslim Personal Law in India.⁶ In some contexts, then, Muslim women achieve positions of greater influence and authority than the *ustānīs* whom we discuss here.

Madrasas in north India

The *ustānīs* and their apparently cloistered *madrassa* workplaces must first be located within the wider context of UP, of gender politics, communal politics (or the politics of religious community) and of educational provision in general.

Northern India is characterised by a gender politics that is heavily inflected by differences of class and rural/urban residence. Aside from the ‘modern’ urban élites in large metropolitan cities, prestigious and respectable forms of gender politics—‘urbane patriarchy’—are most readily practised by the relatively wealthy, especially in urban areas: the male breadwinner supporting his dependent wife and children, with women based in the home, fulfilling their domestic duties. There are some differences between religious communities, especially in dress codes. Muslim women generally wear *salwār* [loose trousers], *qamīṣ* [knee-length dress] and *dopattā* [large headscarf] covering their head and

³ Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers*: 214-223, Winkelmann, *From Behind the Curtain*, “Everyday Life in a Girls’ *Madrasah*.”

⁴ Metcalf, “Women and Men in a Pietist Movement.”

⁵ See for instance Haniffa, “Piety as Politics” (on Sri Lanka), Huq, “Reading the Qur’an in Bangladesh”, Shehabuddin, “Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh.”

⁶ Vatuk, “Islamic Feminism in India.”

chest (rather than *saṛī*); the most conservative also wear *burqa* when they go outside.⁷

Muslim men wear *kurta* [over-shirt] with *pājāma* [loose trousers] or *lungī* [sarong-like garment popular among villagers and poor urbanites], often with a prayer cap. Yet, as a package of hegemonic ideals, some general features of ‘urbane patriarchy’ impinge on all women in some measure. Female employment outside the home is widely regarded as shameful. This is linked with greater investments in the education of sons than of daughters and the tendency to withdraw girls from formal education at puberty, if not earlier. The gender division of labour is intimately tied to practices that are generally glossed as *parda*—the physical separation of space for men and women within the homes of the wealthy, and the bodily concealment and lowered gaze that women should exhibit when they go outside. Public places are male-dominated space in much of the region and women and girls who have reached puberty should (ideally) minimise the occasions when they go outside their homes, in order to avert the dangers of sexual harassment and dishonour. All but two of the *ustānīs* who feature in this paper were small-town women, reared in religious households in which such behaviour was accepted as normal and respectable. But poverty is endemic and—like marital breakdown or having a husband who cannot work—may require women to seek paid employment. And nearly 80 per cent of the UP population lives in the rural areas, most in some way or another dependent on agriculture. There are marked inequalities in respect of landowning, with small or marginal farmers predominating. Many households own no land, and land is rarely owned by women. Rural women, especially those from the poorest sectors, cannot readily meet the requirements of urbane patriarchy, as rural livelihoods generally entail caring for livestock or working in the fields as family workers or employees, at least for some women.

⁷ The normal school uniform for Hindu and Muslim girls is also *salwār-qamīṣ* and *dopaṭṭā*.

It is also crucial to understand the position of Muslims in UP as a religious minority. The recent government-sponsored Sachar Report provided a damning account of independent India's failure to remedy Muslims' disproportionate concentration in the lowest economic positions and their poor showing on social indicators such as literacy, particularly in the north.⁸ Distinctive clothing might simply signal piety in Muslim majority contexts. But in contemporary UP, it also highlights difference in a climate of often pernicious communal politics. Indian Muslims have often been vulnerable to high-profile hate-speak and sometimes to physical violence emanating from Hindu nationalist circles. Indian Muslims have been unwarrantedly demonised for their purported lack of loyalty to the Indian nation and accused of an excess of loyalty to neighbouring Pakistan. They have been the focus of vicious physical attacks on them and their property, most notoriously after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 and in Gujarat in 2002 (and in Bijnor town itself in 1990). Not surprisingly, Muslims in rural Bijnor often portrayed themselves to us as an embattled minority.⁹

⁸ Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community*; see also Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "Investing in the Future."

⁹ Jeffery and Jeffery, *Confronting Saffron Demography*, Jeffery and Jeffery, *Population, Gender and Politics*. This sense of vulnerability is evidenced elsewhere in South Asia. Haniffa, "Piety as Politics" comments that Muslims in Sri Lanka feel 'beleaguered as a socially, politically and economically weak minority' (352) whilst Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh" notes that Muslims involved in study groups consider themselves a 'besieged minority', threatened from one side by insincere Muslims and from the other by the forces of westernisation (486).

UP's extremely fragmented educational provision both reflects and sustains its marked social and economic inequalities of gender, class and religious community and of rural and urban residence.¹⁰ Children from diverse social origins access very different kinds of educational facilities and enjoy very different educational outcomes. Rural areas are particularly poorly served by government-funded schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, caste/class élites ensured that government schools (and other facilities such as clinics) were built in locations most convenient for them. Buildings cannot accommodate all the children entitled to attend. Investment in teaching materials is inadequate. Teachers' salaries absorb the bulk of the education budget yet teacher absenteeism is notoriously high. Problems in recruiting women teachers (especially for rural schools) persist and girls' enrolment and attendance lags behind that of boys.¹¹ For decades, and increasingly since the economic liberalisation of the early 1990s, the urban middle classes (including Muslims) have sent their children either to better quality urban government-funded schools (where entry is highly competitive and may also require paying bribes or admission fees) or to the more recently established private schools (which are mainly located in urban neighbourhoods with sufficient concentrations of relatively wealthy families to ensure their viability). Good quality schooling, whether government or private, is beyond the pockets of rural and urban poor people alike, whilst even rural élites face problems in educating their children because of transport difficulties.¹² Disproportionately, villagers and the urban poor send their children to poorly resourced government schools, despite their limitations. Muslim parents rarely object in principle to

¹⁰ Caste differences are also important but we cannot address them here.

¹¹ Drèze and Gazdar, "Uttar Pradesh", The PROBE Team, *Public Report on Basic Education*, Jeffery and Jeffery, *Confronting Saffron Demography*: 83-122.

¹² Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "Social Inequalities and Privatisation", "Patterns and Discourses of Privatisation", Jeffery, Jeffrey, and Jeffery, "Paṛhā'ī Kā Māhaul?"

sending their children to school—although some disapprove of the co-education in government primary schools—and financial constraints are the main reason for low school enrolment.¹³ The educational experiences of Muslim children in UP, and most especially of Muslim girls, are characterised by low levels of enrolment, high levels of early drop-out, and low levels of literacy, especially in poor and rural populations.¹⁴

In parts of western UP with substantial numbers of Muslims, *madrasas* are filling some gaps in educational provision, generally for small children from rural and poor urban backgrounds.¹⁵ Bijnor district is a case in point: the old town of Bijnor is numerically dominated by Sunni Muslims. The hinterland has one of the largest proportions of rural Muslims in UP (about 35 per cent in 2001). Bijnor town and the surrounding villages are dotted with *madrasas*, some catering to a handful of small children, others with rolls of several hundred including teenagers. Bijnor's *madrasas* mostly operate within the ambit of the renowned *Daru'l 'Ulūm* seminary in Deoband, some 60 km away. Many staff were recruited there or from seminaries linked to Deoband, staff from Deoband sometimes visited Bijnor *madrasas* to ratify their teaching standards, and some able boys obtained entry to *Daru'l 'Ulūm* for higher studies. Bijnor's *madrasas* are not funded or controlled by the Indian state: rather they reflect community initiatives and rely on agricultural tithes from local farmers, *candā* [donations] and the sale of donated animal hides after *Baqar-'id*. Often, their funding is precarious and their facilities meagre. Nevertheless, many Muslim parents in rural

¹³ Hasan and Menon, *Unequal Citizens: 47-75, Educating Muslim Girls*, Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status*.

¹⁴ Hasan and Menon, *Unequal Citizens: 47-75, Educating Muslim Girls*.

¹⁵ There are many *madrasas* elsewhere in India: see Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers*, "Voices for Reform", Hartung and Reifeld, *Islamic Education*.

Bijnor favoured the free or low-cost education and the diligence of *madrasa* staff. Many Muslim parents believed that spending scarce resources on sending their sons to school was futile, given the importance of contacts or bribes for accessing good jobs. And alongside their sense of hopelessness about this-worldly economic prospects, Muslim parents emphasised the importance of living in ways that would ensure a good afterlife. Their children, they argued, could learn this by attending a *madrasa*.¹⁶

One outcome of the soul-searching sparked by the events of 1857 was the focus on individual Muslims' responsibility for self-improvement and self-fashioning. In this, the *Daru'l 'Ulūm* in Deoband (founded in 1867) was central.¹⁷ Among the numerous advice manuals that were published, one of the most famous was *Biḥisṭī Zewar*, containing cameos of the Prophet Muhammad and one hundred exemplary women who acted as role models for believers (particularly women) and commentaries on correct religious practice.¹⁸ In the push for reform, women were crucial for the inter-generational transmission of knowledge about the good Muslim life, about the requirements of Islam and about the need to eradicate unacceptable Hindu accretions (such as extravagant weddings or visiting Sufi shrines). As

¹⁶ See Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "Investing in the Future", "Social Inequalities and Privatisation", "Patterns and Discourses of Privatisation", Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffery, "School and *Madrasah* Education", Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery, *Degrees without Freedom?*

¹⁷ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, Robinson, "Islamic Reform"; Reetz, "Change and Stagnation" discusses the contemporary situation in Deoband. After the unrest in 1857—variously termed First War of Independence, Sepoy Revolt and Mutiny—Muslim élites were particularly targeted for retribution.

¹⁸ Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*. Definitions of 'correct' practice were, of course, hotly contested.

Robinson notes, however, relying so heavily on women posed problems for achieving self-improvement.¹⁹ The constraints of patriarchy meant that few Muslim women had acquired learning, but how could this be remedied without breaching *parda* norms?

This dilemma continues to this day: rural mothers in contemporary north India are unlikely to be the mothers idealised in the reform literature, whilst there are few sufficiently educated Muslim women able or willing to take up teaching posts. Since the 1980s or so, a few residential *madrasas* for girls have opened in various parts of India, though not in Bijnor district (one has, however, been established in neighbouring Rampur district). Girls' *madrasas* teaching advanced Islamic studies can give women some religious authority—yet such women are still expected to stay mainly at home transmitting Islamic knowledge to their own children.²⁰ Some girls' boarding *madrasas* continue to employ male teachers and have elaborate procedures to ensure that *parda* is preserved, although others employ their own graduates as teachers.

In Bijnor town and its hinterland, however, most of the *madrasas* we visited had only very young girls in their student bodies, if at all, and no female teachers. One exception is the *madrasa* in Begawala, about 5 km north-west of Bijnor town. The *madrasa* comprises an extensive compound created piecemeal since its opening in 1958: a large central courtyard surrounded by a mosque, classrooms and quarters for some of the male staff and those boys who boarded. It had a roll of over 1100 pupils, about 600 of whom were girls (day-pupils only) being taught by the *ustānīs*. There were 11 classrooms for girls, but only 5-6 *ustānīs* when we were doing our research.

¹⁹ Robinson, "Islamic Reform."

²⁰ Sikand, *Bastions of the Believers*: 214-223.

Ustānīs and their male colleagues

The Principal at Begawala *madrasa* had been there since its creation. He was trained at the *Mazāhir-i ‘Ulūm* seminary in Saharanpur (an off-shoot of *Daru’l ‘Ulūm* in Deoband that opened within a year of the Deoband seminary’s foundation). Under him were some 15 *molvīs* and one ‘master’ [schoolteacher]. All the *molvīs* had some training in advanced Islamic studies and most were at least *Hāfiẓ Qur’ān* [having memorised the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf*] or *qārī* [trained to recite the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf*]. They had been recruited from Deoband, Saharanpur or other smaller *madrasas* linked to Deoband. The ‘master’ taught boys Hindi and mathematics; he had studied B.Com. in the degree college in Bijnor town.²¹ Shortly before we began our research in late 2000, two visiting *molvīs* recommended that pupils should learn to recite the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf* in *qawā‘id* style (a guttural style that is uncommon in South Asia). Since *qawā‘id* recitation was unfamiliar to the Begawala staff, the *madrasa* management committee sent two *molvīs* to spend a couple of months at another *madrasa* in Bijnor district learning it. They then provided in-service training to their colleagues, including the *ustānīs*. Until that point there had been 11 *ustānīs* at the *madrasa*—but six apparently failed to adjust to the *qawā‘id* style and were sacked.

Most of the remaining *ustānīs* in Begawala had not studied advanced Islamic subjects, although two had BAs. They had learned to read the *Qur’ān Ṣarīf* and Urdu, either through private tuition at home or by attending a *madrasa* as young girls. The oldest and most long-standing *ustānī* was Farida Khatun, who was born in Deoband and learnt to read *Qur’ān Ṣarīf* and Urdu at a girls’ *madrasa* there. Her father’s premature death curtailed her education as

²¹ Hindi is UP’s official language and the medium of instruction in most schools and colleges.

Orally Hindi and Urdu are similar (Urdu has more vocabulary from Farsi and Arabic) but Hindi’s script is Devanagiri, whilst Urdu uses the Farsi script.

she had to contribute to the household income by doing sewing and embroidery at home. Asmat could read the *Qur'ān Ṣarīf* and Urdu (which she later taught privately to girls who came to her home); she had completed BA at the women's degree college in Bijnor town and also *molim* [Urdu-medium teaching qualification, equivalent to B.Ed.]. Imrana studied to Class 8 at school and the *Qur'ān Sarīf* at home, and had qualifications in Urdu called *kāmil* [between Class 12 and BA] and *māhir* [roughly equivalent to MA]. Hanisa had been encouraged to study BA and BTC [Basic Teaching Certificate] after her marriage by her husband's grandfather. Shabnam, one of two younger *ustānīs*, had studied under Farida Khatun in the Begawala *madrasa*, and knew a little Hindi. The other, Aisha, was appointed during our fieldwork and was the exception.²² She studied in an English-medium school in Kashmir before attending a residential girls' *madrasa* in Gujarat for 7 years and achieving 'ālim *fāzila* through studying Arabic, Farsi and advanced Islamic studies (although she was not *Hāfīz Qur'ān*). Her studies cost some Rs8000 per annum: her father was from a relatively poor family in Qaziwala (a village near Begawala) but had improved his family's fortunes by running a 'cosmetic shop' in Kashmir.²³ Aisha described him as a *jamā'atī* (involved with the *Tablīghī Jamā'at*).²⁴ In terms of formal qualifications in Islamic subjects, then, most *ustānīs* were at a disadvantage to their male colleagues.

The *ustānīs* were mainly appointed through personal links. In the mid-1970s, the Principal recruited Farida Khatun's husband, from a family of 'masters' in Deoband, to teach at the Begawala *madrasa*. Shortly after this, the Principal invited Farida Khatun to teach girls

²² Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "Aisha, the Madrasah Teacher."

²³ At that time, a labourer might be able to earn Rs2500-3500 per month.

²⁴ See Metcalf, "Living Hadith", "Remaking Ourselves", Sikand, *Origins and Development of Tablighi-Jama'at*.

in the *madrasa* because he was so concerned about rural women's ignorance of the principles of Islam. The other *ustānīs* were recruited gradually. Asmat was appointed because she was Farida Khatun's daughter. Imrana's brother worked for the Muslim Fund Bank in Bijnor town and had put in a word for her with the *madrasa* management. After being widowed when she was 27, Hanisa had a lengthy career as a schoolteacher in Saharanpur and Dehra Dun, finally being recruited through recommendations from her employers at a Muslim-run school in Bijnor town. Shabnam had been taught in Begawala by Farida Khatun and her father knew the *madrasa* manager. Aisha was the only *ustānī* appointed primarily because of her qualifications—but she, too, had been a Begawala pupil in her early childhood.

Over the course of some two decades, then, the Principal's initial invitation to Farida Khatun had resulted in the recruitment of several women. In this, Farida Khatun was crucial. She assessed the abilities of candidates referred to her (for instance, listening to them reciting the *Qur'ān Sharīf*), before conveying her final recommendations to the Principal. Yet Farida Khatun always met him (and other male colleagues) wearing her *burqa'* with the veil over her face. Prospective *ustānīs*—only those whom Farida Khatun considered appropriate appointees—were similarly concealed when they went through their paces before the male interview panel.

The *ustānīs'* presence in the *madrasa*, indeed, revolved around the continual performance of *parda* norms by *ustānīs* and male staff alike. Neither *ustānīs* nor female pupils entered the mosque. Boys and girls were taught in separate spaces, with the more senior girls' classrooms located on the second storey along a broad veranda overlooking the courtyard. Female pupils briskly traversed the courtyard to their classrooms with their heads bowed, wearing white *salwār*, simple light blue *qamīṣ* and white *dopaṭṭā* covering their head and chest. The *ustānīs* arrived wearing black *burqa'* which they removed only in their classrooms, where they would hang them on a peg, ready for when they needed to go outside.

Male staff normally had no cause to approach the girls' classrooms—but if they did, they announced their imminent arrival by calling out loudly to give the *ustānīs* time to don their *burqa*'. Until Aisha's appointment, senior girls learnt Farsi from a *molvī* who stationed himself outside Farida Khatun's classroom window with his back against the wall, so that she could chaperon his pupils whilst maintaining *parda* herself. As Shabnam put it, this was *majbūrī men* [out of necessity], because there was no suitable *ustānī* to teach them.

Farida Khatun was the routine intermediary between male staff and the *ustānīs*, always signalling appropriate respect and distance by addressing her male colleagues as *āp* [the most respectful form of 'you']. The other *ustānīs* rarely exchanged any words with their male colleagues. Aisha said that some of her male colleagues were probably unaware of her presence. Indeed, when we tried contacting her by telephone, the *molvī* who answered knew of no-one called Aisha working in the *madrasa*. Aisha herself was not allowed to speak to us on the phone because this would have entailed holding a conversation in the main courtyard.

Shabnam and Aisha lived nearby in Qaziwala, Shabnam with her in-laws and Aisha with members of her natal family and they walked to the *madrasa* each day. The other *ustānīs* travelled from Bijnor town daily. Riding in overcrowded public transport and working with male colleagues, however, threatened the *ustānīs*' honour [*'izzat*]*—*although teaching in a largely gender-segregated environment was less hazardous than other employment. Significantly, all the *ustānīs* employed a rhetoric of *ṣavāb* [religious merit] to justify their teaching, as Aisha insisted in the quote that opened this paper. When we first met them, Asmat, Shabnam and Aisha had fewest domestic responsibilities and least need for paid employment: their main reason for teaching was their desire to transmit important knowledge to village girls. Asmat had no children and her husband was a Unani doctor in Bijnor town. Both Shabnam and Aisha taught in the *madrasa* for only a couple of years, however. Shabnam's husband ran a small grocery shop in Qaziwala and sold milk in Bijnor town; her

father-in-law insisted that Shabnam stopped working when villagers began gossiping about her employment. Aisha had doggedly continued with her studies as a way of delaying her marriage, but her father was explicit that women's earnings were abhorrent to him, and she had to resign when he arranged her marriage. For Imrana, Hanisa and Farida Khatun, however, their income was crucial. Imrana's husband had abandoned her when their son was a toddler and Hanisa was a widow, whilst Farida Khatun's husband earned very little and they had two Down's syndrome children.

Within the *madrassa*, repeated re-enactments of conventional *parda* norms served to protect the *ustānīs*' honour [*'izzat*] and enabled the *ustānīs* to avoid disrupting the gender order any more than they were doing already by virtue of being employed. But the everyday practices that this entailed undercut the *ustānīs*' capacity to influence how the *madrassa* was run. They did not make rounds of their local neighbourhoods collecting *candā* [donations] for the *madrassa*, unlike the male staff, who even spent the entire month of *Ramṣān* touring places as distant as Delhi and Surat. The *ustānīs* did not participate in the management committee meetings, and the male staff—especially the Principal—often made decisions that impacted on them. Due to her seniority, Farida Khatun could raise issues with the Principal. Generally, though, the *ustānīs* accepted the men's rulings—as Imrana put it, the men made judgements *soch samajh kar* [having thought and understood]. Usually the male staff did not interfere in the *ustānīs*' teaching practices—although during our research, the *ustānīs* had coached the girls to recite stirring patriotic speeches for India's Republic Day ceremonies and were dismayed to be chastised for wasting time on irrelevancies, a response perhaps reflecting the men's wish to keep the *madrassa* disengaged from the agendas of the Indian state.

Some aspects of the *madrassa* organisation were far from satisfactory for the *ustānīs*. In the early 2000s, there was repeated talk of building separate new premises for girls (including a hostel for boarders). By 2007, nothing had transpired. Meanwhile, the girls'

classrooms were smaller than the ones for boys—yet the girls’ class sizes were much larger and the girls had to sit cheek-by-jowl. Similarly, some 17 male staff were teaching boys, but there were only 11 notional posts—about half of them vacant during our research—for the larger number of girls attending the *madrasa*. And the *ustānīs* were paid less than the male staff.

Ustānīs and their female pupils

Whilst the marking of gender distancing and inequality was always foremost in the *ustānīs*’ dealings with their male colleagues, they shared urbane value judgements about the task at hand: to enlighten and reform rural children. And if the *ustānīs* wielded little authority in relation to the male staff, perhaps they had more prospect of doing so over their pupils. As women teaching girls, the *ustānīs* could engage directly and openly with their pupils. As adult women they had age on their side, given that they were teaching girls—most of whom had not yet reached puberty—trained to respect their elders. The *ustānīs* also had a range of skills—in Urdu, Hindi, English, reciting the *Qur’ān Sharīf* and in prayer—that the little girls lacked. Several were experienced teachers, whether in school-teaching or instructing small groups of children in Bijnor town to read the *Qur’ān Sharīf*. Moreover, their demeanour was inflected with urbane gendered characteristics that marked them off from villagers—and the urban/urbane generally trumped the rural/rustic. But how much authority could the *ustānīs* marshal?

In the first class, girls began learning Urdu using the *ibtidā’ī qa’ida* [introductory Urdu primer] under the guidance of Imrana and Shabnam. They learnt to sight-read [*nāẓira*] the *Qur’ān Sharīf*, beginning with the first two *sipāra* (with the meaning translated orally without delving into disputed interpretations) and gradually adding further portions to their repertoire. They also learned the correct preparation and postures for their prayers as well as what and how to recite. Farida Khatun instructed girls in the next classes in religious

education and Urdu, partly through a five year Urdu course, the ‘Islamic Course for Girls’ [*Larkhōn kā Islāmī Course*], which covers themes from the narrowly theological to more ‘this-worldly’ topics.²⁵ Older girls read simple glosses of portions of *Bihisṭī Zewar* and a few committed the *Qur’ān Sharīf* to memory. Girls rarely continued attending the *madrasa* for long enough to learn the advanced refinements of textual exegesis and theological debate. The few who attended the *madrasa* after puberty learnt Farsi and Arabic from a *molvī* (or from Aisha for the short period she taught at the *madrasa*), rather than being engaged in theological debate. The girls, then, did not approach the situation described by Alam, of boys attending a *madrasa* elsewhere in UP being taught how to argue and debate.²⁶ The girls’ command over religious texts was largely a matter of sight-reading the *Qur’ān Sharīf*, with some basic understanding of the meaning of what they recited. In addition, the *madrasa* was registered with the UP Board of Education and Asmat and Hanisa taught ‘worldly’ subjects such as Hindi, English and mathematics up to class 5. ‘Transfer Certificates’ issued to children passing the Class 5 exams enabled them to transfer into mainstream schools (although hardly any girls attending the *madrasa* did so).²⁷

Within the classroom, the *ustānīs*’ demeanour and the behaviour they expected of their pupils generated a calm and studious atmosphere. Mostly, the *ustānīs* talked both gently and genteelly, avoiding shouting, marking their speech with clear breaks between words and using Farsi-derived Urdu rather than more everyday speech. The regime of bodily discipline entailed sitting cross-legged on rush matting for *ustānīs* and girls alike, with the girls supporting their books and slates either in their hands or on low racks. Girls were required to

²⁵ See Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, “Islamisation, Gentrification and Domestication.”

²⁶ Alam, “The Enemy Within.”

²⁷ Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, “The Mother’s Lap”, “The First *Madrasa*.”

focus on their work, murmuring as they recited the texts they had been allocated, swaying gently back and forth especially when reading passages from the *Qur'ān Sarīf*.²⁸ Several *ustānīs* had a stick for threatening the disobedient (though we never saw one used). In class, the *ustānīs* always wore clean and simple *salwār-qamīṣ* and *dopattā* and they expected similar standards of decorum and cleanliness from their pupils. The *ustānīs* regularly checked their pupils, reprimanding girls whose fingernails were uncut and lined with grime or whose hair was uncombed, un-oiled or infested with head lice, and sending girls whose uniforms were dirty home to change.

Madrasa teachers, including the Begawala *ustānīs*, often portrayed children as *tabulae rasae* and they talked proudly of their creative capacity to mould children into civilised products like potters mould clay before firing it. Indeed, the *ustānīs* described their teaching as a religious obligation to spread enlightenment to rustic children whom they considered *jāhil* [illiterate, uncivilised, ill-mannered, uncouth] in matters related to prayer and *Qur'ān Sarīf* recitation and the niceties of urbane sociality connoted by *adab* and *akhlāq* [courtesy, refinement, affability, virtue and morality].²⁹ Like many of the *molvīs* to whom we talked, the *ustānīs* often commented that boys used their education selfishly (for instance, to obtain employment). The *ustānīs* had no ambition to coach girls for paid employment—which few rural parents would want—but they considered that educated girls contributed to the greater good by instructing a whole family [*khāndān*]. Moreover, a *madrasa* education plays well for

²⁸ When we interviewed Shabnam at home, her baby swayed and murmured baby-talk whilst clutching a piece of paper, imitating what she had seen in the *madrasa*.

²⁹ Focusing exclusively on the *Islamic* character of *madrasas*, however, can obscure the urban and middle-class bias of rural educational provision in general: schoolteachers, especially those in rural postings, had similar ambitions to civilise uncouth rustic children.

girls on the contemporary marriage market. Prospective in-laws often seek demure and obedient young women who have learnt at least the basics of Islam—who are *roza namāz lā'iq* [capable of fasting and praying]—without being corrupted by mixing with boys or travelling far to obtain their education; and young Muslim men have begun to ask their parents to arrange their marriages to educated brides. A *madrasa* education offers young women the possibility of marriage into somewhat more affluent but nevertheless still patriarchal marital homes, where they would be respected for their capacity to instruct their children whilst being just as economically dependent as their uneducated peers.

As embodied examples of urbane female behaviour, the *ustānīs* were to make a crucial contribution to this long-term project. In place of the rustic manners of potentially wayward village girls, they trained girls in the feminine behaviour required by urbane patriarchy—the gender separation entailed in *parda* practices, the body language of concealment (such as head covering and avoiding eye contact), the courteous speech forms that would instantly flag their respect for male authority and for older women. The *madrasa* pupils were continually exposed to verbal and visual messages to this effect: the *ustānīs* dealing with male colleagues, their use of their *dopattā* and *burqa* to signal distance from men, the chaperoning of the *molvī* entrusted with teaching the senior girls, the girls' smaller classrooms and larger class sizes, the lack of boarding facilities for girls, and the cessation of Aisha's employment because her marriage had been arranged. We can only surmise about the understandings that girls imbibed about their entitlements as girls and women—but they probably tended to reinforce rather than undermine conventional understandings of gender differences and gender inequalities.

But how successful could the *ustānīs* realistically expect to be in replacing rustic patriarchy with urbane patriarchy? Often, indeed, they and the *molvīs* talked of the stiff challenges they faced in achieving their 'civilising mission'. Like schoolteachers we

interviewed, the *ustānīs* were acutely aware that anything they managed to convey to their pupils could all too readily be subverted once the girls went back to their village homes. Their male colleagues also lamented how hard it was to teach village children who returned to environments in which speech fell far short of the standards of refined Urdu and was often replete with swearing. Most pupils were from village homes. Most of their mothers (if not their fathers too) had attended a school or *madrasa* only for a short time (if at all) and could read neither Urdu and Hindi nor the *Qur'ān Sarīf* themselves. The girls entered the *madrasa* unfamiliar with writing and reading skills and the formal teaching began with teaching the girls to recognise letters and form them on their slates. But the *ustānīs* could not rely upon parental support to ensure that the girls revised their work at home, the classic problem of 'first-generation' students. Meanwhile, within the *madrasa*, the *ustānīs* were hampered by the gender inequalities enacted in the large class sizes and the small classrooms. It was hard to provide individual attention, for instance hearing girls reciting passages they had memorised or checking their written work. Academically, the *ustānīs'* aspirations and achievements were quite modest. Farida Khatun felt she contributed to some small changes in village ambience, although most girls attending the Begawala *madrasa* attained only modest (and possibly rather impermanent) literacy.

The *ustānīs* often emphasised the importance of beginning to teach girls when they were very young, before bad habits had become engrained, and of encouraging their parents to allow them to continue attending after puberty. Yet it is unclear that even this could solve the problems perceived by the *madrasa* staff. The text of the 'Islamic Course for Girls' was laden with urban middle-class presumptions about cleanliness, household budgeting and rationalised genteel domesticity that were seriously out of kilter with the compulsions of rural

life.³⁰ Similarly, the *ustānīs* were often enacting demeanours that contrasted sharply with the everyday realities of village life. Reiterating the importance of cleanliness could not help mothers without the time or resources to ensure that their children had clean sets of clothing. Indeed, village women's workloads often required them to delegate a lot of childcare to older children, generally girls—whose ability to revise their studies was thereby jeopardised. Exhortation alone would not prevent children from playing in dusty alley-ways or families from living in close proximity to their cattle. Instructing girls on the importance of careful household budgeting would not enable them to escape the seasonality and unpredictability of most rural incomes. In other words, the *madrassa* teachers' didactic agendas promoted lifestyles that could not readily be adopted by poor villagers.

It is instructive to contrast the Begawala *ustānīs* with Muslim women elsewhere in South Asia who are involved in Islamic education. Recently, several scholars have examined all-women study groups, in which instruction and discussions are led by women.³¹ These cases all focus on adult volunteers motivated to engage in projects of self-realisation and debate. In Begawala, however, the *ustānīs* were dealing with young girls whom they considered needed disciplining, not with voluntarily self-disciplining adults. This made for weak links in the chain: the girls might not be committed to learning and they might not see the relevance for their own lives of what they were being taught. Indeed, some village women told us that as children they had sometimes hidden in the sugarcane fields all day instead of going to the *madrassa*. Girls would return home each evening to family and village environments that were often not conducive to sustaining behaviour attuned to the *madrassa*

³⁰ Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "Islamisation, Gentrification and Domestication."

³¹ See Haniffa, "Piety as Politics" (on Sri Lanka), Huq, "Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh", Shehabuddin, "Jamaat-i-Islami in Bangladesh"; cf. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*.

ethos. The impact of the *ustānīs*' instruction was further compromised during vacations (particularly during the month-long break for *Ramzān*) and because most girls were withdrawn from the *madrasa* around or even before puberty.³² Indeed, the Principal commented that once girls left off studying, they all too easily relapsed into illiteracy because the village environment gave so little opportunity for reading and mothers could not support their children's efforts to achieve the niceties of speech or the skills of literacy.

Leading by Example?

Aside from Aisha, the *ustānīs* could not claim significant authority based on formal textually-based qualifications in advanced theological studies. Moreover, the *ustānīs*' participation in the *madrasa* was premised on their upholding conventional *parda* norms: separation of male and female space, concealment, self-effacement, the effective silencing of the *ustānīs* (even the well-qualified Aisha) in relation to male colleagues, and the *ustānīs*' need to be constantly mindful of the threats their paid employment posed to their respectability. In combination, these severely limited the *ustānīs*' impact on the organisation of the *madrasa*. Yet the *ustānīs* at the Begawala *madrasa* shared many of their pedagogic styles and ambitions with the *molvīs* teaching there and in the other *madrasas* we visited. In relation to their pupils, the *ustānīs* aimed to 'civilise' the girls in their charge, not challenging conventional gender norms so much as to trying to supplant rustic styles of gendered behaviour with urbane ones. To some degree, many rural parents bought into this vision—even if they were unable to provide the supportive home environments that the *ustānīs* (and the *molvīs* too) considered vital for this endeavour to succeed. Indeed, the *ustānīs* had a rather

³² Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "The Mother's Lap", "The First *Madrasa*." Boys tended to drop out earlier than girls to enter an apprenticeship or paid employment, an indication of the economic conditions of most pupils' families.

limited capacity to alter the lives of most of the girls in their charge, precisely because their agenda was inflected with gendered urban middle-class assumptions that did not map well onto village realities. Thus, within the cloistered *madrasa* spaces and in relation to the *molvīs* and their female pupils, the authority that the *ustānīs* could exercise was extremely circumscribed.

As we have argued elsewhere, *madrasas* in contemporary UP are a rather ambiguous kind of educational institution.³³ Whilst they may plug a gap in UP's educational provision, they do so in ways that reflect and also perpetuate the fragmentation of educational provision that reproduces inequalities of educational and occupational outcomes. Many boys graduated from the Begawala *madrasa* with limited literacy skills, especially in Hindi. Aside from the handful of boys who went on to attend advanced theological seminaries, few left equipped to compete in the labour market on favourable terms. And girls were not being prepared to enter the labour market at all. Educational segregation constantly replicates Muslims' economic and social exclusion and heightens their vulnerability to discrimination. From this broader perspective, the *ustānīs* and the *molvīs* had much in common—for none of them wielded such authority in the wider world that they could disrupt or transform the marginalised position of poor rural Muslims in UP.

³³ Jeffery, Jeffery, and Jeffrey, "The Mother's Lap", "The First *Madrasa*."

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